

## A SIXTH-CENTURY BYZANTINE SOURCE FOR A VENETIAN GOTHIC RELIEF IN VIENNA\*

MICHAEL VICKERS

The source of the decorative motifs on a Venetian Gothic marble panel (fig. 1) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna has been something of a mystery. The panel is divided into three main parts, each containing a vegetal arrangement consisting of groups of three leaves on either side of a long stem, all of which appear to sprout from a bunch of smaller leaves supported on a small stand. At the tip of each long leaf and atop the central stem is a bust of a nimbused saint bestowing a blessing. In the center of each "bunch" is a somewhat larger figure: on the left an Annunciate Virgin, in the center a Virgin and Child, and on the right the Archangel Gabriel. The fields are framed by vertical bands of five cruciform flowers alternating with five rosettes and horizontal acanthus moldings above and below. The relief, which is 0.69 m. high and 1.75 m. wide, came to Vienna in 1896 with the Este Collection and is attributed to a villa at Catajo near Padua, but nothing is known about its earlier history.

It could hardly be claimed that the source of the decoration is a burning issue, for it has only been discussed twice, by L. Planiscig in 1919 and by W. Wolters in 1976. Planiscig observed that "the stylised form of the plants recalls oriental textiles (tapestries with trees of life),"<sup>1</sup> while Wolters simply says that "the provenance of the ornamental motif is unclear."<sup>2</sup> The object of this note is to indicate a likely Byzantine sculptural source, the appearance of which has been well known for years, but whose provenance can now be established with certainty.

\* My thanks are due to Professor Martin Harrison, Mr. A. H. S. Megaw, and Dr. Helmut Trnek for their assistance in the preparation of this note.

<sup>1</sup> L. Planiscig, *Die Estensische Kunstsammlung* (Vienna, 1919), I, 26–27, fig. 46, no. 46.

<sup>2</sup> W. Wolters, *La scultura veneziana gotica (1300–1460)* (Venice, 1976), I, 165, no. 37; II, fig. 113.

The source in question is the decorative scheme that occurs on the marble relief panels that presumably for centuries formed part of the mumber platform in Zeyrek Camii (the south church of the Pantokrator group) in Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> Another slab (fig. 2) was found during restoration work in the same building, reused as part of the Turkish revetment of the apse where it had been laid with its face to the wall.<sup>4</sup> A glance is sufficient to establish the connection between the Venetian relief and those in Zeyrek Camii. The decoration of the latter is, if anything, more stylized. Stiff, unnatural banana-like growths emerge from formalized vases. The lowest "bananas" were omitted by the Gothic craftsman, but the proposed source is confirmed by the form of the decoration of the vertical divisions between the fields: five cruciform motifs alternating with five circular bosses. It had been suggested that the Zeyrek Camii slabs came from the iconostasis of the north church of the Pantokrator group but it is now known that this was not the case, for 114 more fragments (fig. 3) have been found on the site of the building for which the reliefs were actually made, the church of St. Polyeuktos at Saraçhane in Istanbul,<sup>5</sup> not far from Zeyrek Camii.

The church of St. Polyeuktos was built by Anicia Juliana, probably in A.D. 524–27,<sup>6</sup> and excavations conducted by Dumbarton Oaks and the Istanbul Archaeological Museum

<sup>3</sup> A. van Mi lingen, *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople* (London, 1912), pl. 67, left; J. Ebersolt and A. Thiers, *Les Eglises de Constantinople* (Paris, 1913), 205, fig. 105.

<sup>4</sup> A. H. S. Megaw, "Notes on Recent Work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul," *DOP*, 17 (1963), 346, fig. 9; T. F. Mathews, *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey* (University Park, Pa., 1976), 89, figs. 10–26.

<sup>5</sup> R. M. Harrison and N. Firath, "Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul: Fourth Preliminary Report," *DOP*, 21 (1967), 276, fig. 12.

<sup>6</sup> C. Mango and I. Ševčenko, "Remains of the Church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople," *DOP*, 15 (1961), 243–47.

between 1964 and 1969 have revealed how elaborately—and exotically—the building was decorated.<sup>7</sup> The sources of the ornament of St. Polyeuktos are still being studied,<sup>8</sup> and parallels for motifs in the “banana” relief have so far been found in Sasanian silver and in the mosaics and sculptural decoration of the Dome of the Rock. It is extremely interesting in the present context to note that many architectural members of the church were

taken to Venice in the thirteenth century. Such features as the so-called *Pilastri acritani* in the Piazzetta almost certainly came from St. Polyeuktos,<sup>9</sup> as did the basket capitals at the north and south ends of St. Mark’s;<sup>10</sup> and another basket capital seems to have reached Barcelona.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that a “banana” panel (now lost) also found its way to the Veneto. This relief was used as a model by the Venetian craftsman who made the slab now in Vienna.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Harrison, “The Sculptural Decoration of the Church of St Polyeuktos,” *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Arqueología Cristiana, Barcelona 1969* (Vatican City-Barcelona, 1972), text vol., 325–26.

<sup>8</sup> The final report by R. M. Harrison, N. Firatli, J. W. Hayes, et al., is in preparation. Five preliminary reports have appeared, in *DOP*, 19 (1965), 230–36; 20 (1966), 222–34, 234–38; 21 (1967), 272–78; 22 (1968), 195–216.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison and Firatli, “Excavations at Saraçhane: First Preliminary Report,” 234 note 5; *idem*, “Second Preliminary Report,” 228.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, “Fourth Preliminary Report,” 276; *idem*, “Fifth Preliminary Report,” 199.

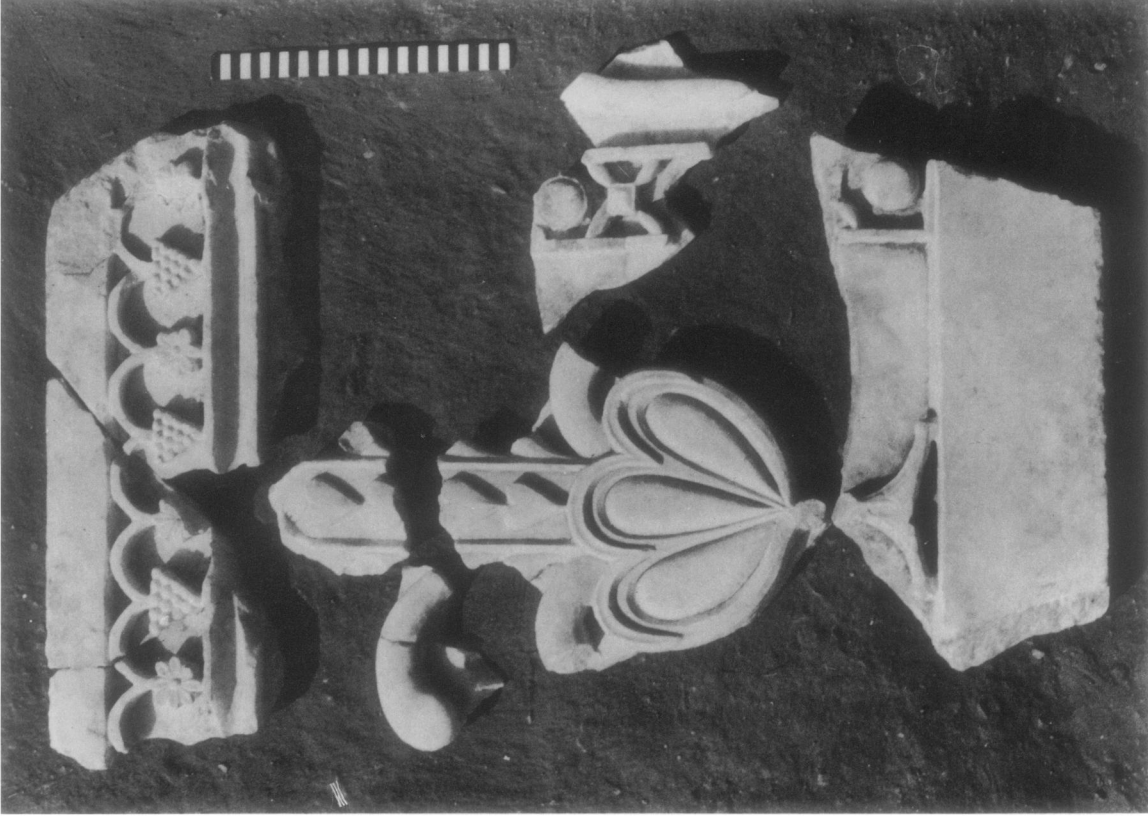
<sup>11</sup> Harrison, “Sculptural Decoration,” 326; *idem*, “A Constantinopolitan Capital in Barcelona,” *DOP*, 27 (1973), 297–300, figs. 1–3.



1. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Venetian Gothic Marble Panel



2. Istanbul, Zeyrek Camii (Pantocrator). Marble Panel



3. Istanbul, Saraçhane, St. Polyeuktos. Fragments Found in Excavations